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COORDINATION QUESTIONS: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF INFORMATICS

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. Commencing with its 1991 session, the Economic and Social Council has been seized with the problems associated with easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access to United Nations computerized databases and information systems and services.

2. In 1992, the Secretary-General submitted a report on the harmonization and improvement of United Nations informatics systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States (E/1992/78) which, in addition to containing an analysis of the causes of the situation, reported on the results of a questionnaire sent to all missions of Member States in New York and Geneva. The replies to the questionnaire identified the six most-requested categories of United Nations information as follows: full texts of documents, texts of resolutions, texts of treaties, press releases, bibliographic data and statistical data. In addition, the areas identified as those most in need of attention included: provision of user-friendly access to on-line information, training programmes for mission staff and coordination of informatics policy and implementation activities across the United Nations system of organizations.

3. After considering that report, the Economic and Social Council again stressed the priority it attached to the issues associated with access to United Nations information systems, and called for a phased programme, to be implemented within existing resources, to achieve access to computerized databases and information systems and services.

4. In 1993, the report of the Secretary-General on this question (E/1993/86) contained a summary of the activities of the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system and also described activities that addressed the need for a continuous flow of information to Member States, those that addressed the need for training and user-friendly access to databases, and, finally, the need for policy coordination.

5. In its resolution 1993/56 of 29 July 1993, the Economic and Social Council reiterated the high priority it attached to easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access for Member States to the growing number of computerized databases and information systems and services of the United Nations. The Council also expressed concern at the limited progress achieved thus far, and stressed the need for close consultation and association between the executive and governing bodies of United Nations institutions dealing with informatics and representatives of States, so that the needs of the latter could be given due priority.

6. The present report contains a summary of the dissemination activities of the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, in response to resolution 1993/56.

I. INFORMATION SYSTEMS COORDINATION COMMITTEE

7. In October 1993, on the basis of the report of a senior-level task force made up of information system experts from several organizations, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) decided to discontinue the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS), which had been in existence since 1982, and to establish in its stead an Information Systems Coordination Committee (ISCC), which would report to ACC through its Organizational Committee and which would have as members those organizations of the United Nations system that participate in ACC.

8. ISCC does not perform operational activities, but rather concentrates on identifying common standards and practices. In particular, the Committee has based its initial programme of work for the biennium 1994-1995 on the priority objective identified by ACC, namely, the establishment of policies and the adoption of standards and recommended practices to ensure wider accessibility of information.

9. It should be noted that this approach was taken to address in particular the issue of improving access by Member States to United Nations information, as requested by the Council in resolution 1993/56. It was agreed that, in the short term, the individual tasks to be carried out under the auspices of the Committee would attempt to respond to that resolution, with achievable objectives. (The terms of reference of ISCC are found in the annex to the present report.)

10. The onus for fulfilling the specific work programme of ISCC rests with different task forces made up of interested agencies. One such task force is the Task Force on Information Access and Dissemination in the United Nations System. The purpose of the Task Force is: (a) to respond to the ISCC mandate to establish policies and adopt standards and recommended practices to ensure wider accessibility of information, and (b) to create a common basis for information sharing within the United Nations system, so that user interfaces and organization of information can be harmonized.

II. UNITED NATIONS INTERNET ACTIVITIES

11. Over the past year, the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system have continued to enhance their dissemination projects and activities. What is particularly striking is that since the previous report of the Secretary-General on international cooperation in the field of informatics (E/1993/86), there has been an accelerated growth in activities relating to the use of Internet by organizations attempting to respond to the mandate of the Economic and Social Council that Member States be given easy access to information.

12. The organizations that indicated that they are currently using Internet to make organization-specific material publicly available include the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the

International Trade Centre (ITC), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank.

United Nations

13. At United Nations Headquarters, the Office of General Services of the Department of Administration and Management has initiated a number of projects that relate directly to the provision of a more user-friendly computing environment for the benefit of Member States. The first of these projects was the establishment of a central focal point for all services required by permanent missions to the United Nations. In addition, an address-naming convention has been established for missions, making Internet available through the United Nations electronic-mail (e-mail) facility, enabling missions to interchange messages and documents world wide with anyone who has an Internet address.

14. Although at present there are multiple methods by which a mission can access United Nations data and services, it is planned to develop a uniform procedure through a single, secure gateway computer for all types of services.

15. In the area of information related to legal matters, the International Trade Law Branch of the Office of Legal Affairs is currently considering an offer by the Office of the Legal Adviser of the United States Department of State to make its documents available to all Internet users via an electronic bulletin board. The International Trade Law Branch is confident that this would speed up its work process (e.g., distributing working papers before working groups and receiving comments thereon) in addition to saving reproduction and mailing costs.

16. The Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development distributes searchable electronic versions of Agenda 21, the final document of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), and has posted the text for access via electronic networks such as Internet and Togethernet. In addition, the Department is making available through electronic networks the text of the documents of the major intergovernmental bodies it services, including the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Sustainable Development.

17. As the originator of a large number of technical documents, such as papers of expert group meetings, workshops and seminars not normally distributed through the official distribution and depository library systems, the Department has a strong commitment to making those papers widely available in order to maximize their usefulness. The Department stores the electronic text of its technical documentation on the UNDP Internet Gopher server (see para. 18 below). Procedures are being established to simplify the electronic dissemination of this body of documentation.

United Nations Development Programme

18. With a view to hosting United Nations data in a more user-friendly environment, the Office of General Services is at present engaged in a joint project with the Department of Public Information and UNDP to establish a

public-access database computer which will contain quantities of information of interest to missions and other external users. It is expected that a simple retrieval format (such as the Internet Gopher programme) which has universal acceptance will be used to house a variety of electronic databases. At present, a project to make United Nations data available on a limited basis has been implemented jointly with UNDP on a UNDP Gopher server.

19. The information currently available on the UNDP Gopher server includes the following: United Nations daily press releases; Security Council resolutions (since 1974); ECOSOC resolutions (since 1982); General Assembly resolutions (since the thirty-sixth session); resolutions of special sessions of the General Assembly (since the twelfth special session); UNCED documents (in English, French and Spanish); UNDP statements of purpose; UNDP press releases; speeches by the Administrator of UNDP; working papers in preparation for the World Summit for Social Development; and UNDP annual reports. In addition, statistical and bibliographical information is provided, as well as a system directory for the United Nations, access to other United Nations Gopher services (e.g., WHO, ITU and the World Bank) and access to environment-related information networks and other external databases.

United Nations Children's Fund

20. UNICEF has recently announced that it has begun dissemination of its public information material on Internet. Some of the material that is currently available includes the full text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and the Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the 1990s, which were adopted by the World Summit for Children in 1990; the second issue of the annual publication The Progress of Nations; and the report on The State of the World's Children.

World Bank

21. In January 1994, the World Bank initiated a new disclosure of information programme to provide access to the Bank's internal documents. A Public Information Centre was opened, and an Internet Gopher facility was set up to provide electronic access.

22. The World Bank is also exploring various ways of using Internet for the dissemination of external documents. Already on-line, or being prepared for uploading onto the World Bank server, are the following: training material and newsletters from the Economic Development Institute; regular reports and updates from the Global Environment Facility; newsletters and interactive dialogue from the Population, Health and Nutrition Department; and research, analytical and statistical material from the Development Economics Vice-Presidency.

23. The Bank plans to utilize Internet in two additional ways: first, through a joint venture with the Consortium for International Earth Science Information Network to disseminate the Bank's economic analyses and statistics; and secondly, as a pilot site for the World Press Centre, which is a London-based, not-for-profit enterprise that is establishing a world-wide system for distributing press announcements to journalists, especially those in the

developing world. Programme information on seminars and conferences and publication announcements will also be included.

United Nations Environment Programme

24. UNEP is actively developing on-line information services. The texts of resolutions, the decisions of the UNEP Governing Council, the UNEP library catalogue and the list of UNEP publications are available on-line. Press releases and information about specific units within UNEP are expected to be available shortly. In addition, nearly all centres of the Global Resource Information Database (GRID) - a catalogue of environmental datasets - are offering, or will soon offer, such on-line Internet services as Gopher and World Wide Web.

World Health Organization

25. Essentially all WHO documents have been prepared using word-processing software, providing the potential for making them available on an electronic medium. A relatively small number of documents are already available on microcomputer diskette, CD-ROM or on Internet for on-line access via the WHO Gopher server. In order to develop a coordinated policy to increase the availability of documents in electronic form, a comprehensive study has been initiated. Press releases produced by WHO headquarters at Geneva are also available on the WHO Gopher server, and consideration is being given to incorporating the press releases of selected regional offices. The WHO bibliographic database (WHOLIS) is available on Internet for full-text searching, including abstracts. WHOLIS offers "one-stop" access to the information contained in WHO publications and co-publications, documents, press releases and audio-visual material.

26. The WHO Gopher server also provides selected statistical data from the General Programme on Vaccines, which maintains data on activities in countries with which WHO is collaborating in immunization campaigns. Consideration is being given to expanding the statistical data on vaccines via Internet, as several statistical databases at WHO could be included on the Internet facilities. This will be incorporated in the study mentioned above.

27. As noted in the previous report (E/1993/86, para. 16), WHO has initiated a project that will provide external access to its Mortality Database through Internet. Because the Mortality Database was originally developed to run on a mainframe computer for direct access only by Geneva users, computer access to the database is currently being redesigned. The first phase of a collaboration with the Consortium for International Earth Science Information Network to restructure the Mortality Database and to implement a new user interface via Internet is scheduled to be completed by the end of 1994.

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

28. Access to Internet will soon be available to staff at the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in Vienna, and it is planned to extend access to country directors and national focal points. Plans are being made to develop tools for on-line access to UNIDO information, which would also

facilitate access by Member States to public information and information on technical cooperation activities.

International Telecommunications Union

29. Since 1992, ITU has made its Telecommunications Exchange Services (TIES) available to missions of Member States at Geneva, enabling 25 missions to obtain Internet addresses.

International Computing Centre

30. The International Computing Centre (ICC), an inter-agency cooperative, has been registered as a full Internet node and is in the process of implementing a dedicated Internet server to meet the needs of the Information Systems Coordinating Committee (see paras. 7-10 above) and to provide all interested parties with the full range of Internet services, i.e., electronic mail, access to Internet servers worldwide and access to information servers at other organizations.

III. OTHER DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

31. Although the use of Internet to provide access to United Nations information is increasing, Internet is not available in a number of developing countries, and its use must be combined with other techniques to allow constituents in such countries to access needed information. This is particularly true for Member States for which affordable telecommunications facilities are not available, and explains why, in addition to participating actively on Internet, several organizations reported activities centring on dissemination of information using such electronic techniques as diskette and/or CD-ROM.

United Nations

32. The United Nations has continued to be active in this respect in several substantive areas. The Statistical Division of the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis has announced a CD-ROM containing the thirty-eighth edition of the Statistical Yearbook. The volume is designed to provide user-friendly access to international statistics in a form that provides different options for retrieval, including image format.

33. The Dissemination Unit of the Department of Public Information distributes diskettes containing press releases in English and French. In 1993, a total of 1,556 diskettes covering 3,290 titles of press releases in English and 328 diskettes with 2,197 titles of press releases in French were distributed, as were diskettes containing the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, Basic Facts about the United Nations, and reports of the Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights to the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session.

34. As part of the follow-up work for UNCED, the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development has produced the Earth Summit CD-ROM in

cooperation with the International Development Research Centre and the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. The CD-ROM, released in December 1993, is an electronic collection of the documentation related to the Conference and its preparatory stages. The objective is to preserve and organize the key official documentation produced during the preparatory process and the Conference and to make it available world wide. The CD-ROM, searchable through a user-friendly Windows-based interface, contains the full text of more than 20,000 pages of documentation. It is the first CD-ROM archive of a major United Nations conference. The Department also distributes searchable electronic versions of Agenda 21, the final document of the Conference.

35. In view of the impact of technological developments on the publishing industry, the Publications Board at United Nations Headquarters has established a Working Group on Electronic Publishing. The Working Group is developing guidelines for the production and dissemination of United Nations materials in electronic format. The Working Group has been asked to propose modalities and criteria (including cost-effectiveness, demand and usefulness) for the selection of United Nations materials, including databases, for dissemination in electronic format; advise on the types of materials suitable for issuance in electronic format and the electronic format considered most appropriate for each type; propose policy guidelines for the dissemination of materials in electronic format, with reference to such questions as sales and free distribution, pricing, control of access and security; study and advise on copyright questions and developments pertaining to the publication of materials, particularly databases, in electronic format; and suggest guidelines covering the choice and elaboration of arrangements to produce and disseminate materials in electronic format. The Working Group is expected to complete its tasks before the end of 1994.

36. On 1 January 1994, the United Nations Office at Geneva issued a CD-ROM containing human rights bibliographic information. The disk includes three files extracted from the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), which is housed on mainframe computers: (a) a subset of 12,000 bibliographic records concerning human rights documentation from 1980 until 15 October 1993; (b) the series symbol file, which translates United Nations document symbols into a user-friendly format; and (c) a subset of UNBIS Thesaurus terms (in English, French and Spanish) related to human rights. An annual update is planned for this CD-ROM, and the addition of full-text taken from the Optical Disk System is being studied.

37. In the future, other subsets of documents on the United Nations Optical Disk System that relate to specialized subjects, such as trade and economics, will be made available on CD-ROM for distribution.

World Bank

38. For the past five years, much of the statistical data of the World Bank has been published on diskette; CD-ROM products are also being developed, with one containing agricultural literature already on the market.

World Health Organization

39. The full text of the majority of WHO technical documents is stored in image format on optical disk in the WHO Library at Geneva. WHO has initiated a comprehensive study (see para. 25 above) to identify which documents on optical disk should be transferred to other media and made available in electronic form. In addition to being available on the WHO Gopher server, the bibliographic database is also widely distributed on diskettes and CD-ROM through a growing number of international non-profit hosts.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

40. FAO is in the advanced stage of developing an electronic World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT), which will provide FAO member Governments, research institutes, universities and private users with electronic access to a unique global treasury of information on agriculture, fisheries, forestry, nutrition and rural development. WAICENT consists of two parts, one dedicated to statistical data (since 1991) and the other to textual information (since late 1993). WAICENT information will be made available in a variety of ways: through floppy disks, CD-ROM, mainframe tapes and on-line access.

41. The AGRIS database (International Information System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology), a bibliographic information system, contains over two million records and is available via two major on-line commercial hosts - DIALOG and DIMDI. In 1990, FAO made an arrangement with a major publisher of CD-ROM to produce AGRIS on CD-ROM. The next step will be to make the CARIS database (Current Agricultural Research Information System), which contains a description of nearly 30,000 agricultural research projects, available on CD-ROM, with the same conditions as those offered for AGRIS.

42. A CD-ROM version of the Digitized Soil Map of the World is a major addition to the list of FAO computerized information series products reported in 1993.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

43. At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a CD-ROM is now issued annually; the 1993 version contained 10 databases, the 1994 update will contain 12. UNESCO is aware of the fact that users need to access the full text of documents and publications easily, quickly and economically. A first step has been achieved with the CD-ROM described above. However, this disk provides bibliographic references only, and users are still faced with the difficult problem of obtaining the actual documents. With this in mind, a medium-term project on electronic management of documents is being developed. In this regard, negotiations are under way with commercial publishers to make the text of the documents relating to the UNESCO General Conference and the Executive Board available on CD-ROM.

International Trade Centre

44. Two ITC databases are available on diskette with tailor-made retrieval software: (a) ITS/FOCUS provides import statistics on 59 markets with five-year time series, analysing the export performance of individual developing

countries; and (b) ESTIMEX provides estimates of import and export values over five years for economies in transition. In addition, a database on trade promotion organizations (comprising about 1,000 institutions world wide in the public and private sectors that can assist foreign exporters and importers) is available on diskette with tailor-made retrieval software.

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

45. At the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Uruguay Round documents, i.e., those pertaining to the multilateral trade negotiations launched in Uruguay in 1986, are available on diskette to GATT Contracting Parties.

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

46. UNIDO currently distributes a bibliographic database, Industrial Development Abstracts, in diskette form and in magnetic tape form on request. The material is made available in developing countries through a network of more than 80 national and regional focal points.

World Intellectual Property Organization

47. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has issued a CD-ROM product, IP-LEX, which records coded texts of intellectual property laws and treaties. The IP-LEX CD-ROM contains the texts of and information regarding international treaties and national and regional laws in the field of intellectual property in force at the moment of publishing IP-LEX CD-ROM. When the fourth production disk becomes available, the IP-LEX CD-ROM will contain an up-to-date collection of the relevant texts of the following countries: China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, as well as the texts of all treaties administered by WIPO, and the relevant regulations and directives of the European Communities (EC).

48. The fourth edition of the IP-LEX CD-ROM will also contain an up-to-date collection of the relevant texts of the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Uruguay, Venezuela and the European countries not cited above, as well the texts related to regional organizations such as the European Patent Organisation.

IV. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

49. The broad scope of the efforts of United Nations organizations and agencies to make electronic information available and easily accessible is evident from the discussion in the preceding sections. In broad terms, the directions suggested for the future are: first, to maintain and enhance efforts currently under way to expand electronic information dissemination; secondly, to publicize the availability of electronic information and increase service-orientation by collecting feedback from users, including Member States, in order to upgrade the quality and relevance of the information content, and to further improve access

and training methods; thirdly, to effectuate collective efforts to ensure efficiency in terms of reducing user frustration in navigating through the various United Nations system databases.

50. The suggested directions for electronic information dissemination in the future are based on the principle of coordination and collaboration among agencies, while, at the same time, recognizing the distributive nature of the process and the decentralized nature of the information. The ISCC and ICC inter-agency groups are crucial forums through which this principle can be realized by the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system. The delivery of products from these efforts is expected before the end of 1995.

51. One effort under way is to develop a concept for a United Nations-wide directory service (using X.500 technology) which would contain directories of officials and organizations, distribution lists, a unified directory of databases and other reference information. This would enable users in different geographical locations to locate information resources available in the United Nations, and, at the same time, obtain information on how to access this information.

52. Another related effort is the conceptual development of a United Nations system-wide information web to provide, through a common interface, actual access to the information repositories themselves. Using the Internet World Wide Web technology, and linking this with the information directory mentioned above, should greatly simplify the availability of United Nations information, bringing about easier access or a "one-stop" service approach, and thus increasing efficiency for both users and providers. The critical success factor, as noted above, is continued coordination and collaboration among organizations and agencies of the system.

53. The phenomenal growth in the number of Internet users can be expected to continue, especially among missions and other governmental entities of Member States. Internet, by common consensus, is not "intuitively obvious" or simple to use. Therefore, to encourage increased utilization of the Internet facilities, training programmes should be coordinated at Headquarters and at other duty stations. At Geneva, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, working in conjunction with other organizations and agencies of the system, could lead the effort. In New York, this training could be spearheaded by the United Nations, working in cooperation with other organizations and agencies.

V. CONCLUSION

54. The goal of providing easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access to United Nations computerized databases and information services and systems was seen as one that could be achieved through a phased programme. In the past year, there has been increasing awareness among the agencies and organizations of the United Nations system of this goal. The activities reported above are evidence of this. It must be acknowledged that much remains to be accomplished before the goal can be achieved, but the work is progressing, and the changes introduced in the inter-agency arrangements described above (paras. 7-10 and 30) promise even more progress in the future.

Annex

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS COORDINATION COMMITTEE

The principal functions of the Information Systems Coordination Committee are the following:

(a) To provide advice and medium- and long-term strategic views to the Administrative Committee on Coordination on information systems technology and services. (Periodic statements of proposed priorities and their implications across the United Nations system should be prepared for the consideration of ACC; the initial priority would be the establishment of policies and the adoption of standards and recommended practices to ensure wider accessibility of information);

(b) To recommend limited areas of information technology which might require standardization with mandatory force (the areas of telecommunications, descriptive codes etc.);

(c) To advise (without mandatory force) on those areas where recommended practices might be adopted, thus allowing for the needs of particular entities (such as database practices, records management and archives, disaster recovery);

(d) To review the implementation of information and telecommunication systems standards and recommended practices by the organizations of the United Nations system;

(e) To provide a forum for an exchange of information among the information system managers in the various organizations of the United Nations system;

(f) To provide an electronic repository on information system developments within the United Nations system;

(g) To prepare reports to ACC on information management issues.